

## THE STRUGGLE FOR HONESTY

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on November 11, 1962 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

In his book, *We Prophesy in Part*, Willard L. Sperry tells an interesting and meaningful story. He writes, “My mother once described to me hearing in New York the same sermon preached in three different churches by one of the reputedly great preachers of the last century ... At a given point in the sermon, as first heard, he hesitated for a word, and said, “What is the word I want?” The congregation leaned forward with eager sympathy to shout the word he could not find, and settled back with a sigh of relief when he got it for himself. He did precisely the same thing at the same moment in the same sermon on a second occasion, and again on a third, with like effect in each of the latter cases. With like effect save upon one woman, who realized that the transaction was not honest, and who therefore lost moral confidence in a man for whom she had previously had the greatest respect.” At another place in the same book Sperry adds, “Preaching can survive countless honest errors; it cannot stand insincerity.”

What Sperry said about preaching I would like to say about Christianity. Christianity can stand countless honest mistakes (we are human; we are not perfect), but it cannot stand insincerity. The greatest single roadblock in the bringing of the gospel of Christ in its purity and its power to the people of our generation is that some of the Christians profess a godliness which they do not practice. Honesty, sincerity, integrity and openness of life are absolutely essential if the church is to stand high in the thinking of our neighbors and friends. If Christians are to have any influence for Christ they must be genuine Christians. I want to discuss with you some aspects of the vital subject of honesty.

### What Is Honesty?

What is honesty? How important is honesty? How many people are really honest? I believe it will surprise you to know that the word “honest” appears only one time in the entire American Standard Version of the Bible. Among the nearly three-quarter million words one is the word “honest.” The one occurrence of the word is in the parable of the sower where Jesus explains that good ground refers to the man of “an honest and good heart.” (Luke 8:15). Yet, we will all agree that honesty is a quality that is taught again and again in the Bible. By some odd circumstance the word happened to be used only once.

Webster defines honesty as “honorable; characterized by integrity and straightforwardness in conduct, in thought and in speech; free from fraud; genuine, fully unadulterated; open; frank; sincere.” Then he gives some opposites, “Dishonest; fraudulent; false; deceitful; crooked.” What is honesty? How important is it? How widespread is it among men?

Honesty is taught on page after page of the scriptures. Passages like the following do not contain the word, yet they are talking of honesty, “Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, if there be any praise, think on these things.” (Phil. 4:8).

### Areas of Dishonesty

There are various areas in which honesty is very difficult. One such area is the realm of things. According to the latest F.B.I. Annual Report, issued this past July for the year 1961, there were 852,500 burglaries in that year. The average burglary involved \$187 worth of money and goods, for a total of \$591,815,000. In addition there were forgery, embezzlement and fraud, and these were up four percent over the previous year. To these dishonest acts involving things, we must add countless thousands of cases of petty thievery, and such other acts as the padding of expense accounts.

In the seventh chapter of Joshua there is the story of Achan. Achan, as a member of God’s army, had received instructions along with everybody else that no spoil was to be taken at Jericho. Everything of value was to be devoted to Jehovah kept for the use of God. Yet, at a certain place when the walls fell down, Achan saw a beautiful Babylonish mantle, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of fifty shekel’s weight of gold. Because of their attraction he carried them away, dug a hole under his tent and buried them. When the army marched against Ai they were defeated because there was sin in the camp. After a time God pointed Achan out as the offender and he and his family were stoned. Number eight of the ten commandments has to do with this very thing, “Thou shalt not steal.” (Ex. 20:15).

One of the areas where dishonesty creeps in is in regard to things. Everyone has struggled with it somewhere along the line. I still remember going down an alley and picking some peaches off a tree the limbs of which hung over the fence, and how that when I got home with my prize my parents told me to take them back. I had to go knock at the front door and return the green peaches to the people who did not know they were gone. My parents felt that honesty was important. I remember picking up some scrap lumber where a new dormitory was being built. But because I hadn’t asked for it I had to take it back. It is hard to be honest in regard to things.

## Dishonest About Truth

Another area in which dishonesty is a temptation is in the realm of truth. In the fifth chapter of the book of Acts the story of Ananias and Sapphira is told. They were members of the church. They evidently were fine members in many respects for they sold a field in order to give to the church. They were more generous than many of us, yet they lied about how much of the proceeds they gave to God. "How is it that thou hast conceived this thing in thy heart? Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God." (Acts 5:4). They were willing to sell a piece of property in order to give part of the proceeds to the church, yet they lied about how much. The ninth of the ten commandments says, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor," which, of course, is lying. (Ex. 20:16). One of the proverbs of Solomon says, "Lying lips are an abomination unto Jehovah." (Prov. 12:22). In the twenty first chapter of Revelation there is an eighth verse which tells about the lake of fire and brimstone, which is the second death, and it describes those who are going to spend eternity there. It mentions "all liars." Lying is a form of dishonesty. It is despised by God.

## Dishonest About Ourselves

Another area in which it is hard to be honest is in regard to ourselves. It is hard to be honest in appraising ourselves. We are tempted to measure ourselves by a generous standard and to bend whatever standard we use in our favor. A man may look at others rather critically, making them the mark in so far as the standards are concerned, yet when he looks at himself he may be willing to wink at failure to live up fully to the standards. That is not honest. One of things that men must learn is to take the standard of God's word and let it say what it says. Wherever their lives fail to meet that standard they must admit it in their own hearts. It is a rather foolish thing to go through life claiming virtues that we do not have, claiming that we are better than we are, because we are not the final judge. We simply are deceiving ourselves and getting ready for a terrible disappointment at the end. One aspect of honesty in regard to oneself is a proper appraisal of one's weaknesses and one's virtue. This must grow out of a knowledge and an application of God's word.

Another aspect of dishonesty in regard to oneself is a dishonest representation of oneself to others. How tempted all of us are at times to fall into that pit! In the sixth chapter of Matthew are the lines, "And when ye pray, ye shall not be as the hypocrites: for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of man." (Matt. 6:5). They wanted to be known as men of prayer, but they were not really men of prayer. Later, in the same book of Matthew Jesus adds, "All their works they do to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, they love the chief place at the feasts, and chief place at the synagogue, and the salutations in the market places, and to be called of men, Rabbi. But be ye not called Rabbi: for one is your teacher, and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your father even he who is in heaven. Neither be ye called master: for one is your Master, even Christ. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be humbled; and whosoever shall humble himself shall be exalted." (Matt. 23:5-12).

There is no place in the life of a Christian for sham or show or a fraudulent representation of himself, whether that be in dress or whether it be in living standard, or whether it be in words. Honesty requires that a man be not only honest about money and about truth, but also that he be honest in his appraisal of himself and in his representation of himself to others.

## Roots of Dishonesty

What about dishonesty? What are the roots of dishonesty? Out of what does it grow? To a large degree it grows out of lack of respect for one's fellow men. Take, for instance, the man who steals. He says, in effect, "I don't care how hard you work for it; I don't care how important it is to you; I want it and I am going to take it for myself." That is basically what is wrong with gambling. A man takes what he does not really earn, takes it from somebody else when he has no real right to it.

What is wrong with lying? It is the same. It is a low regard for one's fellow men. Take, for instance, a cheap, unprincipled salesman. I hope he is the exception and not the rule, for he talks about his product in such a way that the other man is deceived into buying it. In effect, he is saying, "I don't care about you. I don't care whether you get your money's worth or not I don't care whether this is what you are looking for or whether it lives up to your expectations. All I am really concerned about is my commission." His low regard for the other man enables him to lie to the other man. Lying simply says, "I am not very concerned about you."

Or take the man who is hypocritical and who displays himself as somebody he is not, like the Pharisees who stood in the corners of the streets and prayed. His is a desire to stand out among men. His is a willingness to deceive others for his own reputation or benefit. It grows out of a disregard for one's fellow men.

## Disregard for God

In a still deeper sense this whole realm of dishonesty grows out of a low conception of God. There is a passage in Genesis which tells of Joseph working in the house of Potiphar. He had worked there long enough that he had become chief houseboy and was in charge of everything. "It came to pass after these things, that his master's wife (Potiphar's wife) cast her eyes upon Joseph, and she said, Lie with me. But he refused, and said unto his master's wife, Behold, my master knoweth not what is with me in the house, and he hath put all that he hath into my hand; he is not greater in this house than I, neither hath he kept back anything from me but thee, because

thou art his wife; how then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:7-9). Notice he does not say "sin against Potiphar," but "sin against God." When a man steals from another man it involves a low view of the other man, a disregard of the other man, but it also involves a disregard of God. When a man lies to another man it is because of a low view of man, and a disregard of God. Or, to turn it the other way around, the man who respects God will not steal, will not lie and will not be a hypocrite. Respect for God and one's fellowmen is the antidote for dishonesty.

#### More Than the Best Policy

We have had an old saying that honesty is the best policy. It is. It is terrible when a man has been dishonest and is found out. There is not much way back. I remind you of the member of the United States Congress out in Utah who had made speeches everywhere telling about his years in military service and how that he had done some brave things. Eventually the news leaked out that he had never been in military service at all. The papers presented his apology to the people who had sent him to Washington, but his political career was over. Honesty is the best policy if you want to build a life that does not have to be sheltered. If you do not want to run from people, you must be honest. But honesty is a lot more than just the best policy. It is a fundamental Christian virtue. As Christians we need to struggle constantly to be honest. Not only must we teach it to our children, but we must live it. There is no place for hypocrisy among Christians.